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Romanian Trade Diplomat Defects, Hides in the West

By EVAN MAXWELL, Times Staff Writer

The top Romanian trade diplomat in North America quietly defected to the United States in Los Angeles last July and is in hiding on the West Coast. The Times has learned.

Napoleon Fodor, who headed his nation's trade delegation for the last 11 years, is being debriefed by FBI and other security officials about his involvement in and knowledge of economic, technological and political intelligence-gathering by Eastern Bloc diplomats, according to several federal sources.

Fodor's attorney, Patrick Hillings of Beverly Hills, acknowledged that his client is undergoing extensive debriefings by government agents but refused to disclose the nature of those discussions.

Hillings said word of Fodor's defection had been kept secret out of fear of reprisals against the diplomat's wife and college-age son, who are still in Romania.

Intelligence and FBI officials refuse to publicly discuss the potential intelligence value of Fodor's disclosures, although several sources involved in controlling technological espionage said the Romanian government has been particularly interested in data and equipment used in petroleum exploration.

Romania is the second-largest oil producer in the Eastern Bloc, behind the Soviet Union, and both countries have been interested in obtaining oil technology since it was placed under stricter controls by the U.S. government in 1978. Those controls have been reinforced in recent years.

Federal sources familiar with the defection say that Fodor may not be an intelligence operative, although most Eastern Bloc trade representatives are told to obtain technical and other kinds of data at every opportunity.

In his highly placed position as Romania's chief economic representative in the United States, however, Fodor is believed to have obtained a great deal of information about other members of the large Romanian trade delegation and their intelligence-gathering and other activities in the United States.

FBI officials in the past have said that one-third to one-half the personnel of most Eastern Bloc diplomatic and trade delegations are individuals with specific intelligence assignments.

While refusing to discuss the nature of Fodor's discussions with U.S. officials, Hillings conceded, "It is likely that other members of the delegation were involved in economic or political intelligence work, and my client might have known about them."

Hillings said the usual security surveillance that foreign diplomats experience apparently was relaxed in Fodor's case.

"All these people (diplomats) are under more or less continuing surveillance by both the FBI and their own people," Hillings said, "but my client managed to get away without too much trouble."

Fodor arrived in Los Angeles and immediately contacted what Hillings called "the appropriate authorities," presumably the FBI and the U.S. State Department, and expressed "his desire to remain in this country permanently."

Hillings said the diplomat defected for "personal" rather than political reasons and has "tried to avoid giving his government the impression he is involved in an activist campaign against them" out of fear for his family.

Hillings said Fodor's request for asylum is being considered by a committee composed of officials from the State Department, White House and intelligence and immigration personnel.

Embassy Notified

As is standard in diplomatic defections, the State Department has notified the Romanian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and Fodor has been interviewed by his former diplomatic colleagues by telephone. Such steps are taken to prevent later claims that defectors have been coerced by the host country.

Hillings said his client is living incognito on the West Coast but is not in formal federal custody, at his own request.

During his 11-year tenure as chief of the Romanian trade delegation, Fodor was in charge of four trade offices in the United States, including one at 350 S. Figueroa Ave., Los Angeles, and traveled extensively in this country and Canada.

It is this aspect of the Romanian's background that interests some U.S. security officials. Unlike Soviet diplomats, whose travel in this country is severely restricted, Romanian diplomats and trade officials have relative freedom to travel and conduct business.

Such freedom allows them to gather technical data and even to obtain equipment with intelligence value. Oil industry experts say that much valuable information can be obtained from such relatively open sources as seminars, trade shows and tours of manufacturing plants.

One such expert, Santa Ana metallurgist Marvin Wahrman, said he frequently encounters Eastern Bloc technical experts at such places "and it's always clear what they are doing."

"They may not even be intelligence professionals with a covert assignment, but they can talk openly with anybody who is unaligned and pick up a great deal of important information," Wahrman said.